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The pros and cons of gifting a pet at the holidays

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When Chris James decided to give his children a dog for Christmas last year, he knew he was taking a lot on.

In addition to the stress of the season, James, 39, helps run a nonprofit, which keeps him busy around the holidays. And his four children, who range in age from 4 to 11, lead busy lives with school and extracurricular activities. Not to mention that a puppy often requires more attention from owners and initial visits to the veterinarian.

That didn't stop James from adopting a 2-month-old, mixed-breed puppy the family named Lola. The James household, which last had a dog seven years ago, has been slightly more hectic, but no one is complaining.

"Our kids are at the age where they were talking about being responsible for [the dog] and being able to take care of it," he said. "They were just really excited."

Gifting a pet during the holidays doesn't always go as smoothly, warn pet advocates, who say they've seen adopted pets returned to shelters after the novelty has worn off.

Kathleen Griffin, an adoption counselor at the Humane Society of Marion County, said the scenario she sees most often is a child losing interest in the dog after Christmastime. The parents then try to return their newly adopted dog because they didn't want it to begin with, and their children have stopped taking care of it.

This is why she doesn't recommend giving a pet as a gift during the holidays, she said. Instead, she suggests parents wait until the holidays are over to bring a new pet into the home. The holidays in general can be a stressful time for a family. It's a time when the household isn't in its normal routine, which can make it harder for the animal to adjust, said Griffin.

She suggests parents surprise their children with a visit to the animal shelter and let them select a pet they would like.

"Half the fun of getting a new pet is being able to choose," she said.

James said his children McKenzie, 11, Lily, 10, Jack, 7 and Eva, 4, all help out with Lola, who was adopted from the Humane Society of Marion County. His two eldest daughters do a good job of walking and feeding Lola, and Jack plays with the dog. But it's James' job to clean Lola's accidents, which James said he expected.

James doesn't regret adopting Lola around the holidays. With four children, his household is hectic on a regular basis, he said.

"It wouldn't be any different for us around the holidays versus any other time of year," James said.

Adopting over the holidays can be a positive thing, said Amanda Burks, executive director of the Alachua County Humane Society.

People have time off from work and have more family around to help with the new pet at Christmastime, she said, and having that period when the owner can spend time with the animal and get it acclimated to the new home can be critical.

But if you're planning to go on a holiday vacation, she suggests delaying the adoption.

"For those people who are kind of sticking around, it's a great time to get a new pet," she said.

But surprising someone with an animal as a holiday gift is not a good idea.

Burks said she had a customer come into the shelter to adopt a cat a month after his family cat had died. He decided to surprise his wife, but when he brought the new cat home, he learned his wife wasn't ready for a pet just yet.

This lack of communication is what results in animal returns, she said.

Burks said pet adoptions should be considered seriously before making a final decision.

"Be responsible, and think about it before you jump in," she said. "It sounds like fun, but it's a lot of responsibility."

Lisa Jensen, of Ocala, said she hadn't planned to adopt her dog, JoJo, a 1-year-old female Terrier mix, from the Humane Society of Marion County on Oct. 18.

She went into the shelter to visit with the dogs and ended up stopping by JoJo's cage three times. She knew it was fate, she said.

"I always tell my son the dog will choose you," she said.

JoJo went into the Women Offering Obedience and Friendship program, also known as WOOF, before Jensen took her home. The dogs in the program spend eight weeks with the women at the Lowell Correctional Institute and receive training.

She said everything has been going smoothly so far, especially because JoJo is already housebroken and has some obedience training.

Jensen said she got ready for JoJo the same way she would anticipate the arrival of a newborn.

"I tell people 'I feel like I'm adopting a child from Korea,'" she said, "because of all of the preparation we made to have her and get ready for her."

As would any adoptive parent, Jensen took time off from work to bond with JoJo.

She said she wanted to help JoJo get acclimated to her new home.

"I didn't want to be like 'Here's where you live. OK, I got to go to work now,'" she said.

Jensen said this will be a good opportunity to teach her son, Jared, responsibility, although JoJo is primarily hers.

Prior to adopting JoJo, she said she discussed adoption with her family and the obligations that come with having a dog.

She said Jared comes home from school, lets JoJo out of the crate and takes her outside to use the bathroom. It's also his responsibility to feed JoJo at night. He measures her food and checks to make sure JoJo has enough water.

So far, she said her son is still engaged with JoJo and hasn't lost interest at all.

"They're great together," she said. "They love each other."

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